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CHAPTER 7

# May Day: Beltane Fires and the May Queen-Goddess

May Day does not get much attention in America, but our culture has deep mythological roots in this holiday going back to our European ancestors and even to the ancient classical world. May Day festivities as we know them today come to us largely from the nineteenth-century revival of the holiday, and they differ markedly from the more meaningful original celebrations in northern continental Europe and the British Isles that I cover here. In Gaelic lands the festival was called Beltane. The original May Day was not celebrated in colonial America. Early attempts to celebrate it here after European settlement were frowned upon by the Puritanical establishment, just as in Cromwellian England; the holiday was revived there after the Restoration, and was associated with it as a symbol of the traditional order of Church and State.[1] May Day gained some traction in America only as socio-political holiday in connection with workers' rights, labor unions, and Communism in the aftermath of the bombing of the Chicago Haymarket demonstration in 1886, but I do not cover that here because of our focus on mythology. Today May Day is celebrated most enthusiastically by neopagans, enthusiasts of Celtic culture, Wiccans, and some New Agers, but as discussed at the end of this chapter it also has a Catholic Christian component; after all, May Day falls within the Easter liturgical season.

Since May 1 lies about halfway between the vernal equinox and the summer solstice, it was a good time to mark the transition into summer. Indeed, in most of medieval northern Europe, May 1 *was* the beginning

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of summer. In northern Europe, by then the seeds for crops had just been sown, so farmers and their laborers could take a short break, while for pastoralists it was time to drive cattle and sheep out to their summer pastures. Both the sprouting crops and the soon-to-be pastured livestock needed divine protection from the dangers of the natural and supernatural worlds, which is why May Day developed as a holiday and took on the associated rituals and mythology that it did. And a goddess was a good figure to deal with such human concerns.

## The Goddess Mythology Behind May Day

The Goddess of what is now May Day goes back to ancient times, in Anatolia, Greece, and Rome. Spring goddesses came to be venerated at two Roman holiday festivals that led to our May Day. The Roman Empire is important here because it took over much of Europe and the British Isles. Roman mythology, associated rituals, and holidays spread there and were assimilated into local religion, mythology, holidays, and customs.

The Greeks held an annual spring festival for Rhea, the Titaness who was considered the mother of the first gods, including several Olympians, and so she was the Great Mother called Queen of Heaven. We don't know much about her festival, but eventually she became identified with the Phrygian goddess Cybele, whose mythology and ritual is better known, especially from the period after she entered Rome, to which we can now turn.

Cybele, in Rome known primarily as Magna Mater ("Great Mother"), was venerated at the Hilaria festival (from Greek *hilareia/hilaria* ("rejoicing") and Latin *hilaris* ("cheerful"), held between the vernal equinox and April 1. In the Roman version of her myth,[2] she had a son-lover, Attis, who was mortally gored by a boar, and bled to death under a pine tree. Cybele knew that he had not died for eternity but that his spirit simply had taken refuge in the pine tree for the winter, and that he would be reborn from the tree in the spring, on the vernal equinox. When Cybele was introduced in Rome, she was given her temple of Magna Mater on the Palatine Hill and also a holiday with corresponding rituals. In her festival, a pine tree (that of Attis) was cut and stripped of its branches, wrapped in linen like a mummy, and decorated with violets (Cybele's flower, because in the myth violets were said to have sprung from the blood of Attis). It was then brought before Cybele's temple on wagons in what resembled a funeral cortege, since Attis was "dead" inside the tree. This was followed

by days of frenzied grief and mourning (including scourging) known as the "blood days," when the tree was symbolically buried in a "tomb." Attis then resurrected (rose out of the tree) on the day of Hilaria (March 25, the date of the equinox in Rome) and was reunited with Cybele, symbolizing the beginning of spring. The tree was then erected before Cybele's temple, and the people celebrated around it. The celebrations ended on April 1, which may account for the origin of our April Fool's day (a "hilarious" celebration). This ritual has obvious parallels with the Maypole and May Day celebrations.

The second of these spring holidays was the Floralia, named after Flora, goddess of flowers and spring. Originally, she may have been a Sabine goddess, about whom we know nothing other than that she had a spring month named after her on the Sabine calendar (Flusalis, linguistically related to Floralia) and that supposedly an altar to her in Rome was established by the Sabine king Tatius during the legendary period of his joint rule of Rome with Romulus. But none of her Sabine mythology has survived. In Rome Flora acquired her entire surviving mythology from the Greek spring goddess Chloris (from *chloros*—"pale green"), who, as Ovid tells us,[3] was originally a beautiful nymph in the Elysian Fields catering to the pleasures of the fortunate dead. There she also attracted the attention of Zephyrus, the god of the West Wind and of spring, who quickly had his way with her. He married her, in what turned out to be a happy, loving marriage. As a wedding gift he filled her fields (her dowry in the marriage) with flower gardens, flowers which were said to spring from the wounds of Attis and Adonis. Zephyrus, as the West Wind, also brings the spring rains that grow the flowers. Thus, Virgil wrote that "the meadows ungirdle to the Zephyr's balmy breeze; the tender moisture avails for all."[4] Chloris also bore from Zephryus a son, Karpos, in Greek meaning "fruit" or "crop." Through Zephyrus's wedding gift Chloris became the goddess having jurisdiction over flowers, which she spread (by spreading their seeds) all over the Earth, which until then was monochrome. She also became the goddess of spring. In Rome, where she was called Flora, in the late third century BCE a festival was instituted in her honor that lasted from April 28 to May 2. It included theater, a sacrifice to Flora, a procession in which a statue of Flora was carried, as well as competitions and other spectacles at the Circus Maximus. These events included releasing hares and goats (both noted for their fertility) into the Circus, and scattering beans, vetches, and lupins (all fertility symbols) into the crowd. The celebrants wore multi-colored clothing symbolizing flowers and spring, as

later was customary on May Day in Europe, and as famously portrayed in Botticelli's rendering of Flora's dress in his painting *Primavera* ("Spring"). As one views that painting, on our far right is Zephyros catching Chloris/Flora. To their left is Primavera, into whom the nymph Chloris had been transformed following her marriage. She is depicted spreading flowers over the ground, wearing a multicolored flowery dress as in her myth, based on that of Aphrodite (Venus). According to Fragment 6 of the Greek epic *Cypria,* when Aphrodite was born from the foamy sea, she was clothed in garments that the Graces and Horae had made for her, colored in the flowers of spring.

Goddesses also appear in the May Day festivals in medieval and premodern northern continental Europe and the British Isles. Scotland had a goddess of winter called Cailleach (meaning "hag" or "old woman") or Beira, and correspondingly a summer goddess Brìgde. On May 1 there was a festival marking Brìgde's arrival. Similar is the Slavic myth of Vesna, the Slavic goddess of spring and fertility. (The Russian word for spring is *vesna.)* She was typically paired with the winter and death goddess Morena (also called Marzanna). Vesna was venerated each spring for having defeated death and winter. In the spring ritual, her battle with and defeat of Morena was reenacted by setting an effigy of Morena on fire. Vesna's name also seems to signify light, like Eostre marking the return of light after the period of winter darkness. In more northern climates where Eostre and Vesna flourished, the winter darkness is more pronounced than around the Mediterranean, hence the importance of the motif.

This annual spring transition of goddesses forms the background to the tradition of the May Queen. On May Day the May Queen and the Queen of Winter, together with their companies, would engage in a ritual battle, and the result was never in doubt. After the May Queen won, she would be crowned. In this crowning ritual the May Queen would be married to the May King in a ceremony that harks back to ancient sacred marriage rituals, and also to the annual reunion of Cybele and Attis discussed above. Depending on the culture, the May King was variously known as the "Green Man," "Leaf King," the "Grass King," "Green George," "Father May," etc.[5] He was typically a young man dressed in green foliage. In the tradition of Flora, May Day festivities also involved picking flowers, making them into garlands, spreading the garlands and flowers throughout each village, and (as with the tree of Attis) decorating the Maypole with flowers (including violets).

The goddess background to May Day also took on Christian trimmings. In Germany, on May Eve (April 30), called *Hexennacht* ("Witches Night"), famously dramatized by Goethe in *Faust,* witches were said to gather on the Brocken, the highest peak in the Harz Mountains, to foment their evil plans. After the advent of Christianity, the witches were said to meet with the Devil, but their plans were foiled through apotropaic May Day rituals. Eventually that Eve became known instead as Walpurgis Night, named after the abbess St. Walpurga (ca. 710–778), who is said to have been instrumental in bringing Christianity to Germany in the eighth century. Further, the Catholic Church developed a May Day "Crowning an Image of the Blessed Virgin Mary" ritual, which I discuss at the end of this chapter.

## The Bonfire Rituals of May Eve

In Gaelic lands, the main Beltane festival ritual was the bonfire on what is now May Eve, whereas in the non-Gaelic areas of the British Isles (i.e., of English language and influence) Maypole rituals (discussed below) dominated.[6] The bonfires were especially important to pastoralists dependent on their herds of cattle and sheep that were about to be pastured for the summer.[7]

In the colder climate of Northern Europe, May 1 was a perilous but ultimately optimistic moment of transition from the old to the new, from the winter to the summer season. Whereas the February and vernal equinox holidays are dedicated to the *anticipated* victory of spring and fertility, May Day, being halfway between the equinox and the summer solstice when the sun's waxing light and warmth is more clearly felt, *celebrates and guarantees* the full-blown forces of summer. At this point winter is finally defeated and left behind and summer begins. This transformation process necessitated rituals of cleansing and renewal, for which task fire was perfectly suited.

Generally in mythology, fire is a purifying and cleansing agent, which enables it to destroy the causes and manifestations of evil. Fire is therefore an agent of transformation, a notion that goes back as far as Heraclitus.[8] The sun is thought to be made of fire, meaning that fire on earth is just a lesser manifestation and representation of the same solar substance, which is divine by nature. Of the traditional four ancient essential elements, fire was the only one which humans could participate in creating, which connected them to the divine. Building such a fire on earth was a ritual of

sympathetic magic designed to ensure the supply of light and heat from the sun and stimulate the growth of crops. Since the sun can grow crops, people reasoned, so can fires because the substance is the same. A complimentary use of the bonfire ritual was apotropaic, to ward off evil and protect people, livestock, and crops. At least as far back as the ancient Near East, fire was used in incantations to thwart evil spells and sorcery. The ancient Greeks too had a ritual of running over hot coals *(pyrobasia),* which appears to have originated as a springtime purification ritual like those described below. The most relevant springtime fire ritual in the Classical world, however, was that of the Parilia festival in Rome.

The Parilia, celebrated on April 21, was the pastoral festival of Pales, the deity or deities[9] of shepherds and sheep, and it goes back to pre-Republican times. Held just prior to putting the sheep out to pasture for the summer season, it was intended to protect shepherds, sheep, and their stalls from harm. As reported by Ovid in *Fasti,* the original ritual involved cleaning out the sheep pens and decorating them with green branches and garlands of flowers. A bonfire was then lit, and the shepherds would leap through the flames with their sheep in tow. Offerings of cakes and milk were made to Pales, and then the shepherds wet (i.e., purified) their hands with dew, prayed, and consumed a beverage that was a mixture of milk and boiled wine. Then they would leap through the flames three more times.[10]

In medieval Europe, similar May Day bonfire rituals were observed both in northern continental Europe and the British Isles, with the Gaelic Beltane bonfires in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and the Isle of Man being the most emblematic. The word "Beltane" means "bright fire," "Bel" being derived ultimately from the Proto-Indo-European root **bhel,* meaning to shine, flash, or burn.

People thought that on May Eve (April 30), a liminal moment of transition, the veils between the ordinary world and the divine Otherworld (see pp. 159–61) were thin, making it easier to cross from one world to the other. Thus, at this time witches and evil spirits were hatching their evil plans for the people, livestock, and newly planted crops, and trying to carry them out. In response, people built bonfires and performed rituals around them to counteract this evil. The process began when all hearth fires and candles in people's homes were put out, so that the village bonfire could then be kindled. Typically, the bonfire was started by the most primitive means possible, by rubbing two wooden sticks together (or by plank and wimble) to produce sparks emanating from the wood. (The rubbing also had sexual overtones.) Kindling a bonfire in this way rather

than from an existing fire made it most sacred. Afterwards, the people took embers from the bonfire to re-start their hearth fires at home, thus conferring the fire's sacredness onto the household for the next year. Ashes from the bonfire also were scattered over the newly sprouting crops.

Other aspects of the European bonfire ritual resemble those of the Parilia. The herders led their cattle around the bonfire; alternatively, there were two bonfires and they would pass between them. The smoke and heat were considered agents of purgation and protection that would drive out any winter disease and protect the livestock and the farmers from harm during the summer. In some cases bones were thrown into the fire, because the foul smoke that they emitted was considered especially effective for driving away evil spirits. (A fire that consumes bones is the etymological origin of our word "bonfire.") To supplement the bonfire, people gathered and scattered yellow primrose and orange rowan (the colors of which suggested fire) before their doorways to protect the interiors of their houses; rowan was also hung on doorways of cow-houses, farm equipment, and livestock.[11]

In most cases the bonfire ritual also involved preparing and bringing some cakes or pies, at least one piece of which was darker than the others (or was marked to be such). The pieces were distributed randomly among the participants, and the unlucky person(s) with the dark portions had to leap over the fire three times, and bore a stigma for the rest of the ritual and even into the following year. This act, performed on behalf of all the villagers, likewise ensured protection, though more for crops than for livestock. Some commentators see in this rite evidence of earlier human sacrifice.

Today the May Eve bonfire rituals are celebrated by neopagans and others in several festivals around the world. The most important is the Beltane Fire Festival held in Edinburgh, now a tourist attraction.

## May Day Maypole and Related Rituals

The Maypole lay at the center of a broader set of rituals known as "Maying." On May Eve youths of both sexes would go to the woods. Besides having sex, they would gather foliage and flowers (especially violets and daisies), boughs of newly flowering hawthorn or blackthorn, and a tree trunk for the Maypole to be erected the next day. (If the Maypole was large, it would be brought in on oxcarts, or simply dragged by oxen.) Many of the flowers were made into garlands used in processions or simply

for decoration. The tree trunk was stripped of its branches, though in some locations the branches and leaves at the very crown of the tree were left intact as a reminder that they were dealing not simply with a representation of life but with something sacred which has a divine spirit behind it. This serves to remind us to pause and reflect on certain mythological aspects of trees.

Trees are the tallest and most venerable living things on earth. Their lives span many human generations, and so they represent longevity. They are green, and either remain so all year (evergreens) or grow new foliage each spring. They therefore represent life and its preservation and renewal. And since life was divine, trees were associated with one or another deity (male or female) or tree/vegetation spirit. Importantly, trees exist not only in the surface realm of "earth" but also grow their roots into the ground toward the divine realm of the underworld; conversely, they grow their branches upwards toward the heavens, also a divine realm. Trees thus serve as a means of accessing divinity in both heaven and the underworld; in both cases they are conduits to the divine. Therefore, trees also were oracles, used in divination. Tree veneration was ubiquitous both in the ancient world and in pre-modern Europe, so it was natural to utilize trees and their foliage in a spring/summer festival dedicated to the renewal and preservation of life.[12] The Maypole represented the coming of summer and its attendant fertility, together with the associated divine forces that were at work, so it served as the focal point of the day's rituals.[13]

The Maypole was brought from the forest and decorated with painted spirals or horizontal rings, then festooned with flowers and ribbons (Fig. 7.1). It was then erected on the village green. In some locations, smaller Maypoles were placed in front of people's houses. Normally, Maypoles were used just once, but as time went on Maypoles in large cities tended to become permanent, being reused each year until they had to be replaced. The largest known Maypole was erected in 1661 in London on the Strand, stood over 134 feet high, and lasted over 50 years. When it was taken down, Sir Isaac Newton purchased it and put it to the novel, scientific use of supporting Huygen's new large reflecting telescope. More commonly, once taken down, Maypoles were employed as ladders or as beams in buildings.

Along with Maypoles themselves, in some localities the celebrants would also cut and similarly decorate a thorn bush (even if it was already flowering) with flowers, ribbons, and bright shells, which became known as the May Bush. As with the Maypole, May Bushes could be both

**Fig. 7.1** Engraving of C. Cousen based on Joseph Nash painting entitled *The May-pole,* 1866. Alamy stock photo

household and communal (for the whole village, on the village green). Thorn bushes were symbolically important for at least two reasons. First, the combination of thorns and blossoms on bushes and thistles represented opposites, in this case the opposites of winter and summer. Thorns typically represent adversity, suffering (cf. Christ's crown of thorns), and tribulation, and so are symbolic of winter. Decorating them in a spring/

summer motif was not merely symbolic of the transition to summer, but apparently was a ritual of sympathetic magic designed to facilitate that transition. Second, in Gaelic lands thorn bushes were associated with the sí, or fairies. The good fairies were seen as helping to bring on and protect summer and vegetation, so they needed to be encouraged.

On May Morn women would rise early and rush to the fields, meadows, and forests to gather the morning dew, which was thought to have magical healing and cosmetic properties, and applied it to their faces. For the wealthy, venturing out on May Day morning was an involved affair; England's kings and queens did it. In Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur,* Queen Guinevere went out on May Morn in cavalcade with her ladies and knights, dressed in green clothes; they returned "dashed with herbs, mosses and flowers."[14]

Also on May Morn the youths who had been out in the forest all night would make the rounds of the village, decorating the outside of people's houses with flowers, garlands, and boughs while singing songs and blowing horns. In some places they would also carry a miniature representation of the Maypole and a doll representing the May Queen, both of which ultimately represented the divine forces at work in the trees and thorn bushes. Sometimes the main Maypole was decorated with women's clothes and/or a similar doll was hung on the Maypole, making the connection clearer.

As the youths visited each home, they expected to receive a token gift from the homeowners. The idea here was one of mutually beneficial and socially useful exchange and reciprocity: The youths were mediators conferring through the flowers, boughs, and dolls divine blessings, good luck, and protection for households and their crops and animals. In this way the entire village, house-by-house in a private, family-specific manner, came under divine protection. Since the youths were doing a service for the community as a whole and each individual in it, they expected to be rewarded with gifts in return. The gifts were rather nominal and symbolic and included eggs, tea, bacon, sausage, cream, cakes, and money, but it was still thought that the generosity of the gift to the youths (and ultimately to the divinities) would influence the magnitude of the blessing conferred. A homeowner who refused to provide a gift would be warned that his crops and livestock would not prosper. The youths assumed the right to punish the niggardly because they were divine messengers: They are the first to see spring, they bring and reveal it to the community, and establish and hasten it through their rituals. Avarice is dangerous to a

community and was frowned upon, so holiday rituals developed to discourage it. The villagers depend upon one another, and so they must share with each another.[15]

As the day wore on, the villagers would gather around the Maypole, where the organized communal rituals took place. They would typically include some contest in which summer defeats winter, as when the May Queen defeats the Queen of Winter and she marries the May King. Then the pair would be crowned, marking the renewal of fertility at the base of a symbol with obvious phallic significance. After that the villagers celebrated with dancing and singing around the Maypole. The elaborate dances that we see performed today involving the intricate plaiting of ribbons were not original to the holiday but arose only as part of the holiday's nineteenth-century revival. Originally it was a simpler ring dance. The dancers were mainly young men and women, so the dance was an exercise in amorous play.[16] In due course Morris dancing became part of the festival, mainly in England.

Having covered traditional non-Christian May Day rituals, we can turn to a Christianized May Day ritual, the Crowning of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

## The Return of the Goddess of May Day

In the Catholic Church's liturgical year the entire month of May became devoted to the veneration of the Virgin Mary. The high point has always been the ritual known as "Crowning an Image of the Blessed Virgin Mary," said to have been initiated by St. Philip Neri in sixteenth-century Italy, after which it quickly gained widespread grass-roots popularity. This ritual is usually performed on May Day, or alternatively on Mother's Day or May 31. Ever since its inception, the ritual has involved a group of young boys and girls proceeding to a statue of Mary and placing a crown of flowers on her head to the accompaniment of a hymn to her. During the ritual she is given various epithets, including Queen of heaven, Queen of the world (also of "all" the world, and "all of the earth), and Queen of the universe.[17] Several Marian hymns and songs also call her Queen of May. One called "Bring Flowers of the Rarest" goes in part,

> *O Mary! we crown thee with blossoms today,*
> *Queen of the Angels, Queen of the May.*[18]

In light of the strength of these traditions, and in the wake of the adoption of the doctrine of the Assumption of the Virgin in 1950, in 1954 Pope Pius XII officially proclaimed the Queenship of Mary.[19]

In church thinking, Mary is called Queen because she is the mother of the Messianic King, Son of David, is the "perfect follower" and companion of Christ the redeemer, and is the "foremost member of the Church."[20] No flowered crown is mentioned in the official account of and instructions for this ritual, but elsewhere the flowers in her crown are said to represent Mary's virtues, and the ritual is in spring because she brought true, eternal life into our world (leaving behind the death associated with original sin); in the ritual she is called the "Mother of all the living,"[21] which was a biblical epithet of Eve drawn from earlier mythology.[22] Indeed, the crown symbolizes such things in New Testament scripture (Jas 1:12 ("crown of life"); 2 Tim 4:8 ("crown of righteousness"); 1 Pet 5:4 ("crown of glory"); Rev 2:10 ("crown of life"); see also Rev 12:1 ("a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars"), which language is invoked in the crowing ritual.[23] The church says the practice of depicting Mary in art with a crown goes back to the in the era of the Council of Ephesus (431 CE), where it is Christ who crowns her, while the ritual practice of church officials crowning her (now with flowers) had become popular by the end of the sixteenth century;[24] so far as we know, St. Philip Neri (d. 1595) was the first to decorate a statue of Mary with flowers in early May. Finally, venerating Mary in May makes sense to Christians because much of May falls within the 50-day Easter season ending with Pentecost—the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and other followers of Christ—and Mary was with the apostles waiting for the Spirit to descend (Acts 1:12–14).

As a matter of history, the May crowning ritual emerged organically as one of popular devotion to Mary during the period of more traditional pagan May Day celebrations. The Church eventually responded by formally Christianizing and legitimizing the Maytime popular devotions through indulgences. As one Catholic organization explains, "In this way, the Church was able to Christianize the secular feasts which were wont to take place at that time."[25] As for the Crowning ritual in particular, in addition to this ritual's authentic Christian origins, it also has non-Christian roots in traditional May Day mythology, floral rituals of spring, and goddess veneration, as reflected in the crowning of the May Queen ritual described above. It is a later iteration of the perennial early-May goddess traditions in which the mother archetype is expressed in terms of the

fertility and fruitfulness of springtime in full swing,[26] which accounts for why it has stood the test of time; it touches something deep inside our psyche. Calling Mary "our mother" reflects an instinctive and universal attachment to her figure, even though it is inevitably difficult for us to consciously articulate the particulars of what this epithet means. Mary is in all of us, which is to say she is important and deserves our attention, whatever one's religious position. Interestingly, in 1563 the Council of Trent, in explaining why the veneration of images of Mary and other figures is not idolatry, states that such images are venerated "because the honor which is shown them is directed to the prototypes that those images represent."[27] Well, there we have it.